

T.O.G.O.M. for 2009

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Rated PG

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Summary: Fifteen years after the events of “That Old Gang of Mine,” Lois faces another loss and is determined not to let history repeat itself.

Lois Lane shut off her computer and reached for her bag as she got up from her chair. A moment later she had traversed the ramp from the bullpen and was standing in front of the elevator waiting, not so patiently, for the car to come. She had to get home. She didn't want to be late.

Just as the elevator doors opened, a middle-aged man poked his head out of the door of the nearby office. Lois still thought of it as The Chief's office, but Perry White hadn't occupied that space for over two years.

“Lois? Where are you going? I'd like to talk to you about the mayor's new budget. You still have an interview with him tomorrow, right?”

“Sorry, Davis,” she said as she flashed him an insincere smile of apology. “We'll have to talk in the morning. I'm running late as it is.”

An eyebrow rose. “What's the big rush?” He gave her a friendly grin. “Hot date?”

Lois' smile turned coy. “Maybe.”

Before he could ask anything else she had stepped inside the elevator car and had allowed the doors to close.

Within ten minutes Lois was in her jeep and out in Metropolis traffic. Luckily for her it was lighter than normal, and she made it home in record time, without bending too many speed laws.

She practically flew up the stairs and was inside her apartment before her keys were barely out of the locks. Tossing her bag onto a chair, she marched into the living room and flipped on LNN. She wanted to make sure that her ‘date’ didn't have any excuses for being late.

With the television droning on in the background, she headed for the bedroom, stripping off her clothes as she went. If this date didn't come off it wasn't going to be because she wasn't ready.

It had been nearly 15 years since Clark Kent had been taken from her by Clyde Barrow's bullets, and she still missed him. She missed their back-and-forth banter at work and their ability to sense each other's feelings and to find a way to tease the other out of any bad moods. She missed how well they had worked together. She missed her best friend.

It had only been a few weeks after the shooting that Superman had come to her and had confessed that he was Clark and hadn't actually been killed. It had been an emotional night — a night of accusations and recriminations. That night, and over time, they had worked out the more painful emotions but the bottom line was still the same: Clark Kent was gone.

Over the years they had managed to see each other, in a non-professional capacity, on occasion. Whenever Superman could find a break in the more intensive schedule he'd placed on himself, and she could fit it in around her investigations, they would plan a quiet get-together. And often they actually pulled it off.

Most of the time, he would just come to her apartment, and they'd spend the time together just sitting on her couch talking about what they'd been doing since last they'd been able to meet.

On the rarer occasion, he would fly her to some out of the way place where they could actually have a dinner out together, where no one knew who either one of them was. Tonight was going to be one of those. It had been over a month since she'd last seen Clark... socially.

In all those years they had never made love. That's not to say that they didn't enjoy some good old fashion making out from time to time, but they always held the line at complete intimacy. Being the kind of man that he was, Clark had always drawn the line. He had always felt that the act of lovemaking was reserved for a couple in a committed relationship, and a commitment was something that Superman could never give her.

Stealing moments here and there to spend some time together was one thing, but he never wanted to give Lois any false impressions about what their relationship could ever be. Superman was just too public of a figure for him to acknowledge any deep feelings for anyone, let alone a ‘special’ someone.

He'd also made it clear to Lois that if she ever tired of the clandestine meets and wanted to explore something more permanent with someone else, he'd understand and would immediately step aside. She deserved to have the kind of life that he couldn't offer her.

Luckily, she'd managed to break him of the habit of giving her one of those speeches before every date. Now he only got all noble on her every third or fourth time. She usually responded by punching him and then pressing her lips against his to shut him up. It had seemed to work so far.

By now Lois was standing in her underwear in the bathroom. She wouldn't have time to wash her hair because there wouldn't be time to set and dry it before Clark arrived. She stared at her reflection as she drew her brush through her long, still dark, locks. Her hair was now well past her bra strap. Lucy called it her ‘desperate’ look.

Her sister's contention was that once women reached their forties they tended to grow their hair out long because they were desperate to look younger and they thought long hair would give them a more youthful appearance. It seemed especially true with those in public life and the entertainment industry, but Lois had to admit that maybe there was a grain of truth in what Lucy said.

She frowned as she tried to think of any concrete reason as to why she had chosen to grow her hair out. She couldn't remember making any real decision to do so... it just happened. She'd just gone less and less frequently for her maintenance trims, and her hair had gotten longer.

The ironic thing was that she knew Clark liked her in shorter hair. It had something to do with access to her neck. He spent a lot of time there during their infrequent make out sessions.

Still, it had never been so much a conscious decision to grow her hair long as it had been an unconscious one to just not cut it short.

Lois put the brush down and picked up the wash cloth. She needed to scrub off her make-up from the day to be able to apply the make-up needed for the evening. It was just then that the telephone chose to ring.

Thinking it might be Clark, Lois hurried to the small side table where the phone resided. “Hello?”

“Ms. Lane? Lois Lane?”

“Yes, this is she.” The voice sounded familiar to her but she couldn't quite place it.

“Ms. Lane, this is Bernard Klein... of Star Labs.”

Lois was momentarily surprised. Dr. Klein was the titled head of Stars Labs, but had very little to do with the day to day operations anymore. He was pretty much retired. She hadn't heard from him in ages.

“Dr. Klein... Bernie, it's great to hear from you. What can I do for you?”

For some reason he seemed to hesitate. “Ah...I was

wondering if you could come over... to Star Labs?"

"When?"

"Now... tonight."

"Um, Bernie, while I'd love to see a fabulous new discovery that will change life as we know it, I have plans for tonight. Couldn't this wait until tomorrow?"

More hesitation. "He's not coming over tonight, Lois."

"What?" A chill suddenly sped through Lois' body.

"He's here. Please, come over as soon as you can. Come around to the back. I'll leave the door there unlocked."

Lois hung up the phone and stared at the wall for several moments. There was an ache in her stomach that had nothing to do with what she'd had for lunch. Suddenly she bolted for her bedroom. Whatever the emergency, she was sure it wasn't clothing optional.

The chill of the late winter evening bit at Lois' ears and fingers as she made her way to the back of Star Labs. The security lights were on in the front parking lot, but there were very few of them around back, and the pools of darkness created by the shadows of the building and the landscaping caused her to pick her way with care.

The mentioned door was unlocked, and she stepped into a small entryway which then led to what appeared to be some sort of employee break room. The place was eerily quiet.

Star Labs hadn't fared too well over the last decade or so. Still considered a top-flight research facility, continued government budget cuts and the decline in grants had taken a toll on the venerable institution. Always the leader in pure scientific research, it had been hit hard by the tougher economic times and had been passed by the more aggressive commercially-oriented facilities, such as Lex Labs and LuthorTech; which still flourished even after the downfall of their founder. So it was no surprise to Lois that there was no hubbub of activity, no night shift working on their latest breakthrough. While the building and its operation had been endowed well into the next decade, the staff was a fraction of its former size.

Lois went quickly through the break room and into the inner hallway. She was unsure as to which way to go when she spied Dr. Klein coming toward her. She moved to meet him.

"Ms. Lane, I'm so glad you could come." Lois knew that the man had to be pushing seventy, but he looked much the same as when she'd seen him last.

"I got here as soon as I could, Bernie. What's going on? What's wrong with Superman?"

"Come with me."

He led her down several corridors until they were deep into an area that Lois guessed wasn't used much anymore. Dr. Klein took a key out of his pocket and unlocked a rather intimidating door and let her in.

It was a large room but she didn't see the huge skylights, nor the partially draped equipment lining three of the walls. Her eyes gravitated to a medical table in the center of the room and its occupant.

Superman lay on the table. He appeared unconscious, and Lois was shocked at how he looked. The shirt part of his suit was shredded and his chest seemed to be covered with dried blood. As she approached she could see a multitude of wounds covering his chest and stomach. Tears began to sneak past the corners of her eyes. His complexion wasn't just pale; she would swear that he was green.

She turned back toward Dr. Klein. "What happened? Is he going to be all right?"

"Sit down Ms. Lane." He motioned her toward a chair a few feet away. She remained standing. "A few hours ago, a policeman, an Inspector..."

"Henderson?"

"Yes, I think that was his name." Dr. Klein paused to pull out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. "Anyway, this Henderson came in, dragging Superman along by supporting him with his shoulder. It was just happenstance that I was even still here. Most of the day shift had already gone home." He paused again to take a drink from a nearby glass.

Lois began to worry her lower lip with her teeth as she waited for Dr. Klein to continue his story.

"Apparently one of his men had found Superman lying in a pool of his own blood on the docks down at Hobb's Bay. Henderson, knowing that I had been, sort of, Superman's defacto doctor over the years, brought him here. We got him up on the operating table and Henderson told me I should call you as soon as I had a chance."

Lois hesitantly reached her hand over toward the super hero, but stopped short of actually touching him. "Do you know what happened?"

Dr. Klein sighed. "Best I can guess is that Superman was shot with a shotgun loaded with kryptonite pellets." He walked over and began sponging off the dried blood. "I spent over an hour pulling kryptonite buckshot out of Superman. I can't be sure I got it all, but I think I did."

"Has he been unconscious the whole time? Why is he green?"

Dr. Klein grimaced. "I can only assume that the green hue is due to extreme kryptonite poisoning. I have no way of knowing how long he'd been lying out there before the police found him. It was touch and go for a while. I nearly lost him a couple of times.

"Right after I'd pulled the last pellet from his chest he regained consciousness and mumbled something about needing to meet you tonight. I tried to ask him what had happened, but he immediately lapsed back into unconsciousness. That's when I called you."

More tears rolled down Lois' cheek. "I've never seen it this bad. He will recover... won't he?"

Dr. Klein shook his head sadly. "I don't know. He's alive. Right now that's all that's really important."

Lois turned her gaze back to her best friend lying on a laboratory operating table. Tears flowed freely now. She reached her hand out again, and this time, she didn't hold back. She placed her hand on his forehead and brushed an errant lock off his brow. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She didn't turn.

"Ms. Lane, Lois, you should know that the extent of his injuries are quite serious. Even if he does recover." She turned and locked gazes with him. "He may very well never be Superman again."

Lois walked into the secluded lab carrying several bags of take out. It had been three weeks since Dr. Klein's phone call had first brought her to this forgotten part of Star Labs. Everyday work went on in other parts of the large complex, but no one had been in this particular lab in years. If anyone was aware of what was going on here, they certainly hadn't made their presence known.

No one commented on Dr. Klein's presence about Star Labs. He was still considered the head of the facility even though he no longer headed up any research. It gave him the freedom to be available to treat Superman's injuries.

"So, what's the verdict today, Doc?" Lois set the bags down on a nearby bench.

Bernie Klein peeked into the bags. "I'm encouraged by the latest tests."

Lois sighed. "Bernie, he's still unconscious." She walked over and picked up Superman's hand. Suddenly she yelped in surprise. "Bernie! He squeezed my hand. I'm sure of it."

Dr. Klein rushed over and looked at the screens and lifted Superman's eyelids. He spent the next several minutes fussing

over his patient until Lois finally had to grab him to get his attention.

“Doc, talk to me! Is he coming out of it?”

“I think it might have been an instinctive reaction, he’s still in a pretty deep sleep.” Dr. Klein shrugged. “Maybe it’s a Kryptonian thing. Perhaps it’s some sort of healing coma.”

Lois frowned at the absent-minded scientist and was just about to make some comment when her cell phone demanded attention. It took a couple of moments digging in her bag to find it. “Lois Lane.”

“Lane? This is Henderson. Are you still at Star Labs?”

“Yeah, Bill; what’s up?”

“How’s our patient doing?”

“Doc says he’s getting better but he’s still unconscious. His color is normal now, so that’s a good thing.”

“Well, I thought I should let you know, since I doubt you’ve been paying much attention to the tube lately. It’s all over the networks. Three different punks have come forward claiming to have killed Superman. I thought you should know.”

“Thanks Bill, let me know if any of them seem good for the actual shooting.”

Lois closed her phone and bit her lip. It was bound to happen. The press and the news networks had been speculating on Superman’s absence for weeks now. It was only a matter of time until someone tried to boost their rep by claiming to have killed the Man of Steel. It’s too bad that she would have no way of knowing who had shot Clark until he woke up and told her.

Dr. Klein had wandered off to another part of the lab and was looking through a large sheaf of printouts. Lois moved over to Superman. She allowed her fingers to gently trace the outline of his chest and stomach muscles. She and Bernie had managed to remove his shirt and cape so that Clark lay on the table exposed from the waist up. Most of the wounds had healed to the point of being only puckered scars dotting his torso. An irrational anger flashed through her at the thought that someone had dared desecrate such a perfect chest.

Her hand began to sweat so she reluctantly pulled it away. They’d been using several sunlamps left on twenty four hours of the day as part of the treatment. Except for extracting and disposing of the kryptonite, then cleaning the wounds, Dr. Klein didn’t know what else he could do. He continued to monitor Superman’s vitals and had taken some blood samples for testing, but it was pretty much up to the hero to recover from this ordeal. All they could do is watch, and hope.

And for the first time in her life... Lois prayed.

She pulled some of the food out of the bags that she had brought and began to munch on the won tons. Dr. Klein had grabbed some food for himself and occasionally shoved something in his mouth as he scanned the computer printouts. She wondered if he even tasted any of the things he was eating.

“Lois?” The voice was so soft, and distant, she almost thought she had imagined it.

She rushed over to Clark’s side. His eyes were barely open, but he was definitely awake. “Oh, Clark, I thought I was going to lose you... again.” She placed her hand along his cheek.

She could see his struggle to regain his full consciousness. “Where am I?”

“Dr. Klein! He’s awake.”

Klein nearly fell off his stool as Lois’ shout startled him. He rushed over and unceremoniously pushed Lois aside. “How are you feeling, Superman?”

“Weak.”

“That’s understandable.”

For the next several minutes Dr. Klein did whatever it was the doctors did for their patients as Lois stood by and watched. Her emotions were all a jumble. She was relieved and overjoyed at the same time. He was awake, and that meant he was going to

make it. She marveled at the depth of her feelings. It was like a light switch had been thrown to illuminate the dark closet that her life had become. She had always maintained that Lois Lane would never need a man to make her complete. But she was wrong. That awful day at Georgie Hairdo’s club and the intervening 15 years had put lie to that notion. She had needed a man to make her life whole, to make it complete, but not just any man would do.

She needed the one man who was the other half of her soul. She needed her best friend, and partner. She needed the one person who was that indefinable something more. She needed Clark. And now that it appeared that she might be getting him back, she was not going to let him get away again.

Lois entered Star Labs through the usual back door. The place was becoming like a second home to her. Actually, since the call from Dr. Klein, she’d spent more time here than at her apartment. The last couple of days had been hectic, but now it looked like her days of ‘camping out’ at Star Labs were going to be over.

She entered the lab and saw Clark sitting up in a chair. It was a chair that hadn’t been there the day before. Dr. Klein must have had it brought in so Clark would have a comfortable place to sit. Those lab stools were murder. She saw him smile at her as she approached.

“How are you feeling?”

He gave her a slight shrug. “Okay, I guess. I’ll feel a lot better once I’m out of here.”

“Well, I brought you some clothes.” Lois tossed a bundle that she’d brought with her onto his lap. “Are you going to need any help?”

He was a bit shaky standing up but he gave her a grin. “As tempting as that offer might be, I think I can handle it.” He walked, slowly, over to a hanging screen and stepped behind it.

Lois sat down on one of the stools. “Where’s Bernie?”

Clark came out from behind the screen. He was buttoning up the shirt as he came back to his chair. His movements were slow and careful, but he seemed to be surer of himself. He sat back down in the large over-stuffed chair.

“I asked him to give us some privacy.” Lois raised her brow. “I think we need to talk.”

Lois nodded. “Okay.”

“What’s being said out there about me?”

“Well, so far, five jokers have come out and publicly claimed to have killed you. None of them have any credibility and none have come close to explaining what they did to effect your demise.”

“What did you write?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“As far as I can see there is nothing to write. You still don’t know who shot you?”

Clark shook his head. “No, it was like I told you and Dr. Klein. I answered a call for help from a woman. When I landed she was alone, but she looked scared. When I asked her what was wrong, and reached out for her, she pulled back and just said she was ‘sorry’. I saw she seemed to be looking behind me so I turned around. A dark shape stepped out from behind some crates, but before I could use my vision powers to penetrate the heavy shadow, there was a muzzle flash and the boom of a shot. The shock of the pellets hitting me knocked me off my feet.” Clark grimaced in his remembering. “I knew I was hurt bad because I could feel blood coming from wounds on my chest and stomach, and then the pain of the kryptonite hit me and I blacked out.”

“You did get a good look at the woman though?”

Clark shrugged. “Yeah, but she wasn’t anyone I’d ever seen before and she was a pretty average looking woman. I would

probably know if I saw her again, but what are the odds that I'll ever run across her? She could have been just someone who was forced to call out for help. She may not even have had anything to do with the person who pulled the trigger."

Lois' frown wrinkled her forehead. "Yeah, I guess, it just bugs me that whoever did this to you is probably going to get away with it."

Clark bowed his head and stared at his hands. "I should have known that it would only be a matter of time. I've been Superman for a lot of years now, and there have been a lot of attempts to get Superman 'out of the way'. Odds are that someone would eventually succeed."

Lois pulled a stool over close to Clark and took his hand in hers. "I take it you've had a long talk with Dr. Klein?"

He nodded. "Yeah, he told me that I should recover enough to live a normal life, but he doubts that I'll ever be 'super' again."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Would that be so terrible? Clark, Superman has given this city and this world so much of himself over these last two decades. Don't you think he's earned a chance at a peaceful retirement? Yeah, we'll all miss the wonderful things that Superman can do, but this world muddled along without him before he came, and it will manage to muddle along after he's gone."

Clark smiled. "Lois, you're talking about me in the third person."

She laughed. "I guess I picked up some of your bad habits."

"But it does bring me to the crux of the problem. If Superman is gone, what do I do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Lois, my parents have passed, and Clark Kent has been dead for fifteen years. Superman is now gone. Who am I?"

Lois got off the stool and knelt down beside him. "You're whoever you want to be." A sly smile stole across her face.

"What's wrong with being Clark Johnson full-time?"

She nearly laughed out loud at the look of surprise on his face. "You know about him?"

She swatted him on the arm. "Oh come on. Do you really think I wouldn't recognize your writing style, even in a travel book? Besides, some of those photos you used of far away, off the beaten path places, could only have been taken by someone with 'unusual' access. I don't remember seeing any helicopter service credited in the back of the books."

Clark had the decency to look guilty. "Are you mad I didn't tell you?"

Lois scrunched up her face as if thinking on it. "Maybe. I have to admit I was a little miffed when I first discovered your books. But, we saw each other so seldom, and we did have other things on our minds on most of those occasions." She got up and sat back on the stool. "So why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't a conscious thing. I'd only planned to write one or two books. Just to get enough money to help my folks out near the end there, before they were forced to sell the farm. But they were pretty successful and my publisher begged me to do a whole series."

Lois smiled. "And you never could say no to anyone, could you?"

"Well... that, and I liked to have a little spending money to be able to take you out to dinner occasionally. It would have been bad form to make my date pay for her meal."

"A little spending money? Clark I happen to know that your last three books were on the New York Times best seller list. I would think that Clark Johnson has to be doing all right for himself." Lois smiled at Clark's blush. "So what would be the problem with you becoming him for real?" Suddenly she frowned. "By the way, how did you manage to work up a false identity anyway? If you are getting paid for your work and paying your taxes, you must have some sort of paper trail to

cover you."

"The President."

Lois gawked. "The President? Of the United States?"

Clark blushed again. "Yeah, I had a meeting with him and explained my situation and how I would need some way to legitimately make some money. I figured I could trust the President of the United States with my secrets, so he used the witness protection program to set up a cover identity for me. Only three people know who Clark Johnson really is... now four."

"Wow... but that does sort of solve your problem doesn't it? You can move to some rural part of some state. One where they've never had any real contact with Superman so no one will recognize you in street clothes."

Clark clasped his hands in front of him and began to wring them. "I guess that could work, but... what about you, Lois?"

"What about me?"

"Well, I wouldn't have any powers anymore. It would be difficult to visit you very often. I'd miss you."

Lois snorted. "It's not as if we got to see a lot of each other when you did have powers. Superman was pretty busy, and the need to be circumspect didn't give us the freedom to really be ourselves anyway." Lois winked at him. "But not to worry because I plan to go with you."

"What?"

"You don't honestly think that I'm going to let you get away again, do you? I hope you don't think ill of me, but in a way I'm glad that this whole mess happened." She held up her hand to forestall any comment. "I'm not saying I'm glad for the hurt you've suffered, and I know that the loss of your powers is something that you won't get over for a long time. And I'm not glad that Metropolis, and the world, has lost their super hero. But from a purely selfish point of view, I am glad that now I... that now we, finally have our chance to be together." She reached out and brushed his cheek. "I think Lois Johnson will be a fine name."

Clark seemed stunned. "You want me to see if I can get you a new identity too?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "I don't think that will be necessary. I think we can take care of it a bit more simply. Like by, oh I don't know, getting married?"

"Oh, yeah." Clark averted his eyes for a moment then turned back. "But, Lois, what about your job — your life at the Daily Planet?"

"I've already quit, Clark."

"What? But you love your job."

"Loved. Yes, I did love that job, but things change; people change. Clark, I've been an investigative reporter longer than you were Superman. I'm tired. The thrill of the chase isn't what it used to be. I'll admit that throwing myself into my work helped me get through after you were gone, but you were also the one who taught me that people are important too. I was devastated when Luthor destroyed the Planet all those years ago, and it wasn't because I'd lost my job. It was because I'd lost my family."

Clark reached over and pulled her into his lap. She snuggled next to him, but continued talking.

"My family at the Daily Planet was all I had. I had lost my best friend, and then my sister moved to California permanently. Do you know that she has six kids now?" Clark began to rub her arm. "Like yours, my parents passed a few years ago, not that they were ever real parents like Martha and Jonathan, but they were mine and I do miss them. But I still had Perry and Jimmy and the Daily Planet."

"Lois... I,"

She placed a finger on his lips. "No, don't go there. I told you that no one ever blamed you for what happened to Jimmy. For

crying out loud, you were in China when Jimmy was killed. It was rough on me, I really did think of him like a brother. But I think it was worse for Perry. It was only six months after Jimmy's death that Perry retired. I had no one left. Just my job, and an occasional visit from you."

"I thought you liked Davis?"

She shrugged. "He's a competent editor, and a decent guy, but he's not Perry. He's not even Jimmy, and he's definitely not Clark." She turned herself on his lap until she was looking into his eyes. "I'm ready to move on with my life, as long as I can move on with you."

The two of them stood up. "You're sure about this?" She pulled his head down to hers and captured his lips in a kiss that told him everything.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure."

Clark ran his hand through his hair in a gesture that Lois knew well. "So, what do we do about Superman?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? Don't you think we need to make some explanation as to where he is or why he's gone?"

Lois put her arms around Clark and leaned her head onto his chest. "Fifteen years ago, Clark Kent was shot and killed. His body hadn't died, but Clark Kent was still dead. A few weeks ago, Superman was shot. His body didn't succumb, but for all intents and purposes, Superman died that day. Let people think that Superman is dead. Maybe it will help wake them up and realize that they have to depend a little more on themselves again." She leaned her head back and gazed into his eyes. "If your powers ever do come back, we'll worry about that then." She rose on her tip toes and gave him another quick kiss.

"Okay?"

He put his arms around her. "Okay." He shifted out of the embrace and draped his arm around her shoulder as he steered her toward the door of the lab. "So, what's first on our agenda?"

Lois looked up at him and smiled. "First stop is Cindy's Salon. I need a haircut."

Fin.